



MEDIA RELEASE

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919 N Broad Street • Brooksville, FL 34601

School District Files Lawsuit

Brooksville - The Hernando School District filed a lawsuit Monday afternoon, asking the court to compel the Hernando County Commission to place on the November ballot the district's referendum asking voters to renew the existing half-cent sales tax for school facilities.

The school district passed a resolution to place the renewal on the November 2022 ballot, even though the current tax doesn't expire until 2025. On May 10, the county commission voted 4-1 to delay the ballot until November of 2024. School board members explained to the county commission that placing it on the 2022 ballot was necessary to effectively plan and prepare for the growth in enrollment that will result from the 11,000 new houses the county has already approved with more coming.

"I want to make it clear that we would much prefer to have the county commission cooperate with us and place the issue on the November ballot, as requested," said school superintendent John Stratton. "Unfortunately, that is not the case. Waiting until 2024 will only delay the timeline to adequately meet the needs of our growing community. We can't serve our families well if we wait until those new students are walking through our doors before we develop a clear plan for building or repairs."

The school district is required to develop a 5-year plan for building, renovating and expanding facilities. It is projected that new housing developments will increase student enrollment by more than 3,700 students in the next few years and the district can't plan or bond for additional funds unless they know that voters have approved the measure. The process of building a new school takes five years to find and purchase land, secure the financing, design and build a new school. Those new students will arrive long before the schools can be built or expanded.

"The bottom line is we have logical and compelling reasons for placing this on the 2022 ballot, and the county has no compelling reason for making us wait until 2024," Stratton said. "It's best for taxpayers, it's best for students and teachers, and it's best for prudent planning and managing growth."

If the county commissioners don't change their mind, the district will move forward with the lawsuit, which contends that the state statute guiding the county's ministerial role provides no discretion to change the date. The lawsuit states that Florida Statutes in "clear and unambiguous language...imposes a mandatory non-discretionary clear ministerial duty upon the county commission and directs them to place the 2022 referendum on the 2022 ballot."

"Taxpayers don't want one local government to sue the other," said School Board Chairman Gus Guadagnino. "It's a waste of money. But it would be a bigger waste if we can't move forward with our facility plans and bonding needs without knowing if the money is going to be there in 2025 and beyond. There's a quick and easy solution, and that is for county commissioners to truly understand our rationale and place it on the ballot."

The lawsuit was filed in the Fifth Judicial Circuit in Hernando County.